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AUTHOR	George, Patricia; Aronson, Rosa
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ABSTRACT

The academic success of underserved students depends on their experiences within the education system. These experiences are influenced by the degrees to which their own culture and language are acknowledged and integrated into the school program, how engaged they become and are encouraged to become, and how well educators support them in instruction, guidance, and assessment. Tracking sets disadvantaged students on a course for failure. School counselors' preconceived assumptions color not only their interactions with students, but also their decisions about how to offer advice on coursework and academic paths. Parents' participation in their children's schools has been proven to make a difference in students' academic success, but many minority parents perceive barriers to participation. Despite court rulings, racial and ethnic segregation continues in U.S. schools. Five reform initiatives that educators can undertake to open pathways to college for undeserved students include acknowledging the negative impact of educators' low expectations, based on racism or stereotyping, on underserved students; creating opportunities for educators and students to get to know each other better on a personal basis; celebrating diversity and affirm self-worth; set high expectations and promoting equal opportunities; and improving home-school-community connections. (Contains 44 references.) (SM)

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PACIFIC RESOURCES FOR EDUCATION AND LEARNING
900 Fort Street Mall • Suite 1300 • Honolulu, HI 96813
Phone: (808) 441-1300 • Fax: (808) 441-1385
Email: askprel@prel.org • Website: www.prel.org

How Do Educators' Cultural Belief Systems Affect Underserved Students' Pursuit of Postsecondary Education?

By Patricia George and Rosa Aronson*

Despite the national call to leave no child behind and the ongoing commitment voiced by our policymakers, government, and educators to provide a quality education to all the nation's youth, traditionally underserved (low-income, underrepresented minority, and first generation) students continue to perform at the lowest academic levels, drop out of school more often, and enroll in postsecondary institutions at lower percentages than their white, middle-class peers.

Consider these statistics:

- Only 47% of low-income high school graduates immediately enroll in college or trade school, compared to 82% of high-income students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1999).
- Only 18% of African-American and 19% of Hispanic high school graduates in their late 20s have earned a bachelor's degree, compared to 35% of whites (NCES, 1999).
- The opportunity gap persists regardless of academic preparation: 22% of college-qualified high school graduates with low family incomes don't pursue postsecondary education, compared to only 4% of high-income graduates (NCES, 1997).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (1998), the proportion of minority college students has been increasing primarily because of rising numbers of Hispanic and Asian students. While this is good news, the gap between the percentage of underserved students and white students who enroll in postsecondary institutions is still wide. With the newly implemented anti-affirmative action legislation being passed in states such as California and Texas, that gap will most likely continue to grow.

*Patricia George, former editor and associate director at the National Association of Secondary School Principals, is an education journalist. Rosa Aronson is associate director of strategic alliance and special projects at the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Both are under contract through PREL's Pathways to College Network.

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Table 1 below lists the percentage of high school seniors who graduated in 1992 and enrolled in postsecondary education by 1994. Background characteristics such as race/ethnicity, family income, and parents' highest level of education are included.

Table 1. Percentage of 1992 High School Graduates Enrolled in Postsecondary Education by 1994 (by background characteristics)

	Any 4-year institution	Public 2-year institution	Other, less than 4-year institution	Total enrolled by 1994
Race/Ethnicity				
Asian/Pacific Islander	54.2%	28.4%	3.6%	86.2%
Hispanic	30.5%	34.3%	5.7%	70.6%
Black (non-Hispanic)	42.4%	22.7%	6.2%	71.3%
White (non-Hispanic)	47.1%	24.8%	4.0%	75.9%
Family income				
Less than $25,000	32.5%	25.4%	5.6%	63.5%
$25,000 to $74,999	47.2%	27.9%	4.2%	79.3%
$75,000 or more	76.5%	14.1%	2.4%	93.1%
Parents' highest level of education				
High school graduate or less	25.8%	27.3%	5.8%	58.9%
Some college	41.0%	29.5%	4.2%	74.7%
College graduate	71.4%	18.0%	3.1%	92.5%
TOTAL	45.1%	25.7%	4.4%	75.2%

Source: Access to Postsecondary Education for the 1992 High School Graduates, by the National Center for Education Statistics, 1997, Table 2, p. 7.

What prevents underserved students from pursuing postsecondary education? The Pathways to College Network was founded, in part, to determine why more low-income, underserved students are not enrolling in college and to improve college access and success for these youth. Although several factors may affect students' pursuit of postsecondary education, this document examines the role educators' expectations play in creating barriers to college access and recommends strategies for opening pathways for students.

A close look at what really goes on in schools and classrooms reveals that instead of an atmosphere of high expectations and conviction that all students can and should achieve, many of our schools perpetuate deeply rooted cultural beliefs that actually create barriers to student access to and success in postsecondary education.

The belief systems that emanate from our culture shape the way we think, live, act, and interact with each other and with those outside our culture. Our expectations and cultural belief systems reflect our values and perspectives and at the same time can close our minds to accepting other ways of thinking and doing (McQuillan, 1998). Although the United States is called the great melting pot and the land of opportunity – a place where all citizens have an opportunity to succeed – the predominant culture is grounded in and shaped by white, middle-class values and expectations. Those who do not succeed (by white, middle-class standards) have not worked hard enough to overcome whatever barriers they have encountered. In other words, underserved students who do not go on to postsecondary education have only themselves to blame. But what obligation, if any, do our schools have to ensure all students have the same opportunities and help compensate for those who walk through the doors at great disadvantage, whether economically, socially, physically, or culturally?

Teacher Expectations in Schools

Most schools are organized as bureaucracies with well-defined procedures for working with students, teachers, and the community. These procedures determine who will be allowed to participate in the educational process, how they will be treated and expected to behave, how their performance will be judged, and down what path they will be directed once they leave the school.

While these procedures may seem equitable, there still is, to a certain extent, a hidden curriculum that emanates from the cultural beliefs of those who work in the schools and those who set policy for them. No teacher explicitly teaches it, no school or community outwardly espouses it, but it is there, displayed through how students are taught, how they are treated, what guidance they receive, and what resources they are allocated. Our schools are often run by and therefore reflect the dominant white culture, which determines how minorities are treated in schools (Ogbu, 1988). Those students who "conform" will be nurtured and helped to succeed while those who look or act differently will be tolerated, ignored, or even discarded.

This idea of schooling to maintain the status quo is prevalent in the research and has been echoed in many ways by such theorists as Michael Apple, who suggests schools function to distribute the "high status" knowledge and cultural resources to select students in order to separate them from other students. Some assert that one goal of this hidden curriculum is also the replication of the country's economic structure and status quo. In other words, there is a deliberate attempt to maintain inequality based on race and class (Apple, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1988). Bowles and Gintis (1976) contend that groups of students, sorted largely by race and class differences, receive different educational experiences based on the occupations they are expected to assume within the existing class structure. So, in essence, schools educate students in a way that maintains our society's class system. They also contend that lower-class students' rejection of the education system is to be expected, as they, too, are focused on maintaining their place in society.

The victims of this hidden curriculum are the traditionally underserved students who struggle every day to overcome cultural bias and racial stereotypes that set them apart from their white peers. Gandara (1999) suggests African-American, Latino, and Native-American students often have different learning opportunities because of their ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds – opportunities dictated by the predominant cultural beliefs of our society, which, in turn, translate into teacher

expectations. In fact, Gandara proposes that the most important single factor in the under representation of these students in higher education may be the gap in achievement between these students on the one hand and white and Asian students on the other.

Like all of us, educators bring their own cultural beliefs to their schools. It is through the lens of these beliefs that they assess students' abilities, judge their potential for achievement, and help decide their futures by opening doors or closing them.

Lowered Expectations, Diminished Opportunities

Unfortunately, the stereotypes Americans hold of specific races and ethnic groups have not disappeared through the generations. While we teach about tolerance and equality and express outrage at open acts of discrimination, results of a study by David Williams of the University of Michigan revealed that 45% of the whites surveyed believed that blacks are lazy; 29% said blacks are unintelligent; fewer than 1 in 5 considered blacks to be hard workers; and 56% said blacks would rather live on welfare than work (as cited in Cooper, 2001).

Data from the National Opinion Research Center reveal that in general, Americans evaluate minority groups more negatively than whites. Respondents were asked to evaluate on a scale of 1 to 7 characteristics of whites, Jews, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinos, and southern whites. These characteristics included intelligence, laziness, and motivation to be self-sufficient. Latinos and African-Americans were ranked last or next to last on almost every characteristic measured (as cited in Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1998).

Gans (1997) suggests that American policymakers avoid dealing with the poverty issue by labeling the poor as morally deficient and undeserving, and therefore not worthy of help. After all, since in the United States anyone can improve their social and economic status if they want to, there must be something wrong with those who "choose" to remain in poverty.

Preconceived Notions

Stereotypes of non-whites are carried into the school and classroom. Although educators might not make their beliefs public, they have been heard to profess that all African-American male students are gang members; African-American and Latino students use confrontation to get what they want; minority students cheat because that is how they get along in our society; minority parents really don't care whether their children get a good education; Native-American students are all children of alcoholics and most likely will follow in their parents' footsteps; Asian students are self-motivated "whiz kids" who excel because, unlike some of their peers, they are raised to respect educators and education (Feng, 1994; Lipman, 1998).

Some teachers believe that students from poverty fail to achieve because they lack motivation. An offshoot of this "deficit model" is that teachers have low expectations for students who they believe are simply unable to meet high expectations. They tend to demand less academically and behaviorally, which translates into fewer opportunities to achieve and a decreased chance of graduating and going on to higher education. A teacher at a low-income school said of her students: "We need to tell them, 'You're not all going to college.' Some are not college material and we should tell them that. They should set lower goals and follow them" (Lipman, 1998, p. 226).

Attitudes like this could partially stem from geographic location. For example, an analysis of why blacks in Jamaica achieve to higher levels than blacks in the United States, given that the former live in such terrible poverty compared to the latter, showed that "the fundamental assumption in the Caribbean on the part of those Black teachers . . . was that [all students] were teachable . . . . No one

doubted for a moment that the students could not be taught: not the students, their parents, or teachers" (Hirsch, 1996, p. 102).

As early as kindergarten, teachers may determine future learning opportunities for students based on culturally related expectations for good students. For example, one kindergarten teacher, at her first meeting with students, evaluated their abilities based on what she considered to be desirable traits. The factors she used to determine a student's academic ability were all tied to socioeconomic class – dress, cleanliness, and behavior. Those who conformed to her views of acceptability were considered "fast learners"; those who did not were considered "slow learners." The fast learners received the majority of the instructional time, rewards, and attention, while the slow learners were continuously disciplined and received no academic support (Rist, 2001).

The academic support teachers provide within the classroom is also related to their expectations of students and often differentiated based on beliefs and expectations related to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class. In the classroom, teachers tend to call on those students whom they perceive to be more able learners and engage them more actively in the learning process. They are more likely to provide extra time and help to these students, because they expect them to learn, grow, and succeed. On the other hand, teachers tend to become impatient and ignore students whom they believe are unable to achieve to the level of the others in the classroom (Brophy & Good, 1974; Gandara, 1999). Often, these lower expectations – and differentiated learning opportunities – are related to cultural beliefs about the academic ability of the students.

Culture Clashes in School and Classroom

While the rise of multicultural education and the increase in the diversity of our schools have attempted to make cultural differences less of an issue, schools remain, for the most part, based on white middle-class values, belief systems, and expectations. So, while there may be banners proclaiming Black History Month and advertising multicultural fairs, many educators still expect their students to conform to the white, middle-class mold. Weissglass (2001) contends that this kind of racism has led to "the unquestioned acceptance by the [education] institution of white, middle-class values" (p. 49).

When students' home culture and the school's culture are very different, educators can easily misunderstand students' behavior and thus use instructional strategies and discipline that actually are at odds with the students' cultural or community norms. For example, many African-American boys are raised in such a way that they are highly physical and desire interaction. Therefore, a classroom that promotes interaction and movement may better suit the learning styles of African-American boys. If this is not the educator's preference, and if the teacher reads the students' very social behavior as intentionally disruptive, then she or he might focus on disciplining those students rather than teaching them (Delpit, 2001).

Similarly, according to Delpit, Latina students frequently have trouble speaking out or exhibiting their knowledge in a gender-mixed setting and, as a result, often defer to boys. Unaware of this culture-based behavior, teachers are likely to insist that all learning groups are gender-mixed or assume that because a Latina does not contribute to class discussions, she does not know the answers. Likewise, in many Native-American communities there is a prohibition against speaking for someone else. So strong is this prohibition that Native-American students may find it difficult to summarize others' works and thoughts, and instead express their own opinions even when instructed not to do so.

Assumptions and expectations about Asian-American students' high academic abilities and respect for education affect the way educators teach and interact with them as well. Feng (1994) suggests that the "whiz kids" image is a misleading stereotype of Asian students that masks their individuality

and may conceal academic problems. If these students are viewed as naturally smart, teachers are less likely to monitor them closely and realize when they do need assistance.

Differences in language and verbal expression related to culture can also create differentiated opportunities for students in the classroom. In 1977, English sociologist Basil Bernstein suggested that social classes express themselves differently using language. The same can be said for different ethnic and racial groups. Unfortunately, educators often equate students' use of non-standard English with ignorance or rebellion, thus reacting to these students in negative ways such as holding lower expectations of them (considering them too ignorant to speak proper English) or focusing on *how* students express themselves rather than *what* students are expressing.

Unfortunately, students who are uncomfortable with or not used to speaking standard English – either because English is not their first language or because they have been raised in an environment colored by distinctly different speech patterns and means of expression – may feel thrust into an environment in which they must focus not only on learning content, but also on communicating that knowledge in a way that may seem alien and therefore difficult to do to the satisfaction of the teacher. Some teachers go so far as to belittle these students in front of their peers or ignore them completely. As a result, students may lose confidence in themselves and their motivation to learn.

Educators also make assumptions about students based on their dress and treat them according to biases about what they believe certain clothing represents. Most schools – even those with dress codes – have distinct groups of students who define themselves largely by their dress. For example, the "jocks" wear name-brand athletic apparel, the "punks" sport tri-colored hair and body piercings, and the "preps" wear khakis and button-down shirts.

This appearance-based judgment, combined with general assumptions about race and ethnicity, can have detrimental effects on students' academic experience. For example, according to Lipman (1998), when a high-achieving African-American inner city student attending a white middle-class suburban school wore overalls with one strap undone, he was suspended for 10 days because the teacher believed the unbuckled strap denoted gang membership. Nothing in the student dress code forbade unbuckled overall straps, and students in other middle-class schools wore their overalls that way without consequence. This teacher simply acted on an assumption based on the combination of her preconceived beliefs.

Steele (1997) proposed that one reason many minorities may perform poorly or do not participate at all in academic activities is that they do not want to risk confirming the stereotype that they are intellectually inferior. Rather than risk getting the answer wrong, they will not attempt to answer questions at all or will use unacceptable behavior to move the focus away from academics. They may express their lack of interest in academic success whether a true reflection of their feelings or not. As well, some underserved students, African-American males in particular, believe that even if they do succeed in school, racism in American society will limit their opportunities to reach the same level of success as whites (Mahiri, 1998). Their attitude, then, is "Why bother?".

Students who do not feel welcome in a school may try to disassociate themselves from the school and the schoolwork, responding to what they may see as racism or classism by losing interest. Because some underserved students may not want to be considered a part of the majority or dominant group, they may openly resist the rules and values of the dominant culture. For example, they may create a counterculture with their dress and language to set themselves apart from the mainstream and in a sense challenge the power of the educators (Ogbu, 1988). They may also openly resist the rules and values of the dominant culture by being late to class or not doing their homework.

Sometimes culture simply wins out over education. Fine (1991) relates the story of a Puerto Rican student who feigned his inability to read so he could be "with his people" in the lower-tracked classes. He was more comfortable in those surroundings and was willing to place that comfort and sense of belonging above academic achievement.

Unlike this student, some minority students suppress their cultural heritage and become "raceless," working hard to conform to the expected language and behavior of the school. They may feel pressured to conform to white middle-class values and beliefs at the expense of their own cultural or family beliefs in order to succeed academically. Unfortunately, these students may be accused by their peers of "acting white" and ostracized from their own groups. The same may be true of the white students who change to be accepted by other racial groups (Rist, 1979; Steinberg, 1996).

If underserved students do choose to adapt to or adopt a culture that is more acceptable within the school, they must not only learn and master those acceptable behaviors and attitudes, they must also create for themselves what in some ways is a new identity that integrates the home and school cultures. This process requires them to make decisions about which cultural values and practices to adopt and which to discard. This new identity can create friction between the student and his or her peers, family, and community.

Students take cues from their teachers' attitudes and actions. Students who know they are expected to do well and who receive the extra support are more likely to achieve; students who perceive that they are not expected to do well usually do not; and students who achieve despite expectations that they will not are regarded unfavorably by the teacher. In this way, many students tend to live up to their teachers' expectations of them (Sprinthall, Sprinthall, & Oja, 1998).

Because they have already decided that underserved students are unable or unwilling to achieve, many educators simply give up on them, making little or no effort to know these students on a personal level. This lack of interest is compounded in larger urban schools by lack of time and opportunity to get to know students. While some minority teachers might better connect with underserved students, many of them have been "educated" out of the minority culture and are seen as "acting white." Students no longer identify with these teachers, and teachers have a hard time identifying with students (Spindler, 1997).

In Summary

The academic success of underserved students depends on their experiences within the education system. These experiences are influenced by the degrees to which their own culture and language are acknowledged and integrated into the school program, how engaged they become and are encouraged to become, and how well educators support them in instruction, guidance, and assessment.

Less Rigor, Less Guidance, Less Support

Adelman (1999) suggests that no single factor predicts college completion for underserved students more than the rigor of the courses taken in high school. When teachers hold low expectations for students or do not believe that students can learn based on their race or class, teachers may provide a less rigorous curriculum and fewer opportunities for students to excel. As a result, these students are less academically prepared for college.

Tracking for Failure

The phenomenon of tracking students based on expectations of ability is widespread and perhaps more than any other school structure has been criticized for providing – and even legitimizing – unequal education. Originally, tracking was meant as a way for students with varying abilities and

interests to have a different curriculum and educational features geared toward their academic level (Oakes, 1985). The contention is that students who achieve academically cannot be challenged when part of a class with students who need remediation. At the same time, students who need extra help cannot receive it if the class is moving too quickly for them to master basic concepts.

Oakes (1985) contends the following:

> My hunch is that, given the circumstances of placement decisions, factors often influenced by race and class – dress, speech patterns, ways of interacting with adults, and other behaviors – often do affect subjective judgments of academic aptitude and probably academic futures, and that educators allow this to happen quite unconsciously. We know that these kinds of recommendations often result in more disproportionate placements of students from various racial groups and social classes than do placements by test scores alone. Poor and minority kids end up more often in the bottom groups; middle- and upper-class whites more often are at the top. (p. 13)

In addition, African-American children are three times as likely as white children to be tracked into special-needs classes but only half as likely to be put in gifted programs. Some teachers even believe they are doing underserved students a favor by labeling them at-risk so they won't feel so pressured to achieve. Kozol provides a chilling example of the fate of tracked children: "The little girl who gets shoved into the low reading group in 2nd grade is very likely to be . . . urged to take cosmetology instead of algebra in the 8th grade, and most likely to be in vocational courses, not college courses, in the 10th grade, if she hasn't dropped out by then" (as cited in Scherer, 1992).

Thus, tracking can create barriers to student achievement and to postsecondary opportunities. Students assigned to lower tracks have fewer opportunities to acquire higher-level academic competencies; they spend less time on academic tasks and more time on remediation and low-level activities; and teachers have lower expectations of them. As a result, students often have lower expectations of themselves. Students in lower tracks seem to accept that they have been placed in a lower track because that is where they belong. They do not blame or resent the school for the placement; in fact, students in lower tracks express the same satisfaction with the school as students in higher tracks. The difference in attitudes is related to students' perceptions of their own capabilities and their aspirations for the future. Students in lower-track classes have more negative attitudes about themselves and lower educational aspirations than do their higher-track classmates (Oakes, 1985). One white student who was tracked into honors classes said, "[The teachers] can trust us more. We're in the accelerated classes . . . they expect more out of you . . . . I think that between an honors student and a regular student they would probably put the blame on regular students" (Lipman, 1998, p. 47).

Teachers in lower-track classes as well as those in heterogeneous classes may lower their assessment and grading standards for students they believe cannot pass on their own, thereby denying these students the challenge and rigor required to achieve on standardized tests and college placement exams. Teachers may also change their instructional strategies and interactions based on what they believe students are capable of understanding. Rather than challenge some students to think critically and creatively, they may concentrate on "managing" them, either to avoid possible conflict or because they believe these students cannot think critically.

In her study of five elementary schools in New Jersey, Anyon (1980) observed that the teachers in schools that served students from blue-collar families focused their instruction on memorization and simple processes. Rarely did the teachers explain why the content they were teaching was important.

Students' work was often evaluated not according to whether it was right or wrong, but according to whether the students followed the right steps. The teachers focused on controlling classroom time by making decisions without involving the students. One teacher commented, "You can't teach these kinds anything. Their parents don't care about them and they're not interested," while another added, "I hate to categorize . . . but they are lazy" (p. 130).

In the middle-class schools, which were a mixture of students from several social classes, the teachers emphasized following directions to arrive at the correct answer and understanding why a particular process was followed. The interactions between teachers and students were relatively positive, and the teachers allowed the students some choice and decision-making. The teachers evaluated their students' work based on what was in the textbook and answer booklets.

In the affluent schools, in which students were from the upper income level of the upper middle-class, students were continually asked to be creative and express their ideas. Students had a rather substantial voice in what happened in the classroom, and the teachers often negotiated with them in order to maintain control. The atmosphere was exciting and supportive.

In the executive elite schools, in which the parents were the CEOs of major companies, the teachers focused their instruction on developing students' analytical intellectual powers. Students were continually asked to reason through problems. The focus was on achievement and excellence, and the teachers were polite and respectful to the students.

In a sense, teachers are tracked as well. According to Haycock and Huang (2001), between 18% and 28% of secondary school teachers in each of four core academic areas do not have even the equivalent of a college minor in their teaching field. The situation is even more alarming in predominantly minority high schools, where only about half of the science and math teachers in schools with 90% or greater minority enrollments even meet their state's minimum requirements to teach those subjects. Unfortunately, "the patterns are similar no matter which measure of teacher qualifications you use – experience, certification, academic preparation, performance on licensure tests: we take the students who are most dependent upon their teachers for subject matter learning and assign them teachers with the weakest academic foundations" (p. 12).

Weak Home-School Connection

There is a remarkable consensus among educators that parent involvement in their children's schooling does make a difference in the students' academic success. Parent involvement at the high school level is usually low, because parents do not feel the need to be closely involved or do not see the opportunities. However, a variety of barriers actually may inhibit the participation of parents of underserved students – even those who want to be involved. These barriers include parents' lack of confidence interacting in a different culture, insufficient English language skills, and/or lack of understanding of how the school system works and whom they should contact. Or, maybe parents are simply not invited to participate or made to feel welcome in the school.

Some parents – especially Hispanics – fear that active participation in their child's education may be seen as interference. Throughout Hispanic culture the school and teachers are considered the absolute authority; it is the school's job to educate and the parent's job to nurture. In many Latin American countries it is considered unacceptable for parents to become involved in school matters (Espinosa, 1995).

This lack of a home-school connection is exacerbated when the school does not initiate contact or help families become involved in their children's education. Some educators do not want parents to

be involved or they perceive that if the parents really cared about their children's education, they would initiate contact themselves.

Studies have shown that ethnic minority families have high aspirations for their children, yet not all parents have the skills and resources to help them achieve those goals (Steinberg, 1996). They do not know how to advocate for their children. And because educators often do not make the initial gesture to invite parent participation, they do not understand the many reasons for that lack of involvement. Delpit (2001) attributes this lack of effort to increase parent participation, in part, to an underdeveloped personal interest in the students: "Nowhere do we foster inquiry into who our students really are or encourage teachers to develop links to the often rich home lives of students, yet teachers cannot hope to begin to understand who sits before them unless they can connect with the families and communities from which their students come" (p. 209).

The students themselves may be directly affected by the lack of parent involvement and a home-school support system. According to McDonough (1997), underserved students tend to set their academic sights lower than white students with comparable academic records, because their parents do not understand the postsecondary education system and therefore do not provide the encouragement they need to pursue education beyond high school.

Inadequate Academic Guidance

Expectations related to cultural biases also find their way into the guidance office, where counselors' assumptions color not only their interactions with students, but also their decisions about how to offer advice on coursework and academic paths. According to Oakes (1985), although high school seniors are often given the choice of "a curriculum leading to college entrance, one leading toward a vocation immediately following high school, or a more general course not leading to college, . . . these choices are . . . not made free of influence. They are informed choices – informed by the school guidance process and by other indicators of what the appropriate placement is likely to be" (p. 13).

When students do not, for whatever reason, consciously strive to attend college, they do not focus on selecting the courses designed to put them on that path during their high school career. Often their goal is simply to graduate, so they select the easiest way to get there. Because many parents of underserved students do not understand the competitive college admission process, they do not push their children toward more academic classes. And when guidance counselors do not make a concerted effort to steer students toward a more rigorous curriculum, the students choose the vocational or general track courses rather than those that could make them college-bound. When students do not believe they can achieve, and when no one tells them otherwise, they close the doors to their future.

Noguera (2000) provides a clear example of how lack of guidance limits opportunities for underserved students. In his study of Berkeley High School in California, he found that because the school only requires two years each of science and math for graduation, most black and Latino students meet only the minimum requirement. Satisfying that requirement is insufficient for students who want to be admitted to most colleges and universities. Because most white parents understand the competitive college admissions process, they encourage their children to take three or four years of math and science. Students who are not motivated to graduate are also not encouraged to take advanced classes.

In Summary

Educators bring to school preconceived notions about students based on their own beliefs about the role that race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status plays in student achievement. Those notions affect

educators' expectations of students' ability to learn and therefore influence the kinds of opportunities they provide for students to achieve.

Through strategies such as tracking, teachers determine what students learn and how. If teachers perceive that students are not able to achieve to high expectations, they water down the curriculum, thereby robbing the students of the rigorous curriculum so important to success in college and beyond. When guidance counselors and academic advisers fall into this same pattern of uninvolvement with students whom they believe to be unintelligent or uninterested in furthering their education, the doors to the future are slammed once again.

Finally, parent involvement at the secondary level is typically low; parents are less likely to have a connection with school personnel unless their child is having difficulty and they have regular contact with the school as part of an intervention strategy. However, even if parents of underserved students want to be involved in their children's education, they are often prohibited from doing so because they lack the understanding of the school system, do not have adequate language skills, or believe that they cannot or should not get involved.

Tracking Schools and Resources

Despite the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision, in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that separate schools were inherently unequal, racial and ethnic segregation continues in our nation's schools. The percentage of black students in 90-100% minority schools grew from 33.9% in 1992 to 45% in 1997; the percentage of Hispanic students in these schools was 35.4% in 1997 (Orfield & Yun, 1999). That, in and of itself, is not a problem except for the fact that students in primarily minority schools often experience less rigorous curricula, fewer opportunities for enrichment, less-qualified teachers, and fewer resources.

More affluent schools may respond with test preparation programs and extra help and resources to prepare students for state-mandated tests as well as for the SAT and ACT. Regardless of the debate about the validity and fairness of standardized tests and the contention that they are culturally biased – an issue that is being addressed – they still are a benchmark for determining college acceptance. And, as shown in Table 2, underserved students continue to perform at a lower level than their white counterparts.

Table 2. SAT Scores for 6 Ethnic Groups National Sample 1999

Ethnic group	No. of test takers	Average verbal score	Average math score	% verbal score 500+	% math score 500+
African-American	116,144	433	421	25%	21%
Mexican-American	42,750	452	456	32%	33%
Puerto Rican	13,897	455	448	33%	30%
Native-American	8,118	484	481	45%	43%
Asian-American	85,128	497	552	50%	66%
White	705,019	527	528	61%	61%

Source: Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement, by The College Board, 1999.

More often than not, it is the white middle-class or affluent parents who, because they are comfortable with the system, demand and receive the kinds of resources they want for their children. Lipman (1998) reports that the affluent white parents at one school – the majority of whose students were enrolled in the gifted program – demanded that the doors to classrooms on the upper floor be installed to decrease noise. They succeeded in raising the money and having the doors installed. The classrooms for the average students remained doorless.

In this time of accountability, school and district rankings, and publication of standardized test scores, districts are under much pressure to ensure that all their students achieve. At the same time, schools are tracked just as students are. Affluent schools, already enjoying the extra resources the community provides, also become the shining stars of the district and continue to receive the lion's share of resources and attention. Those schools that enroll predominantly underserved students, while qualifying for federal aid, continue to struggle to provide adequate textbooks, safe school facilities, and top-notch teachers. Often resources are focused more on ensuring that students pass standardized tests rather than go on to college. The Education Trust's recent analysis of funding (2001) revealed that 86% of the districts with the greatest number of poor students receive less money per student than those districts with the fewest poor children.

While at first sight this sad reality may not seem to be related to cultural beliefs, it leaves open the following question: What does it say about our collective ethical beliefs? The resource gap does not exist in a vacuum. As a society, we allow it to exist without intervening and our silent approval betrays a deep-rooted cultural belief about who deserves to share in the wealth of our nation.

Based on their own beliefs about race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background, educators make judgments about students' ability to learn, interest in learning, and chances for success in college and beyond. Students who do not conform to the ideals of educators – and society – are considered outsiders and even outcasts. Educators act on those judgments by opening and closing doors to academic success through the way they interact with and support students, the opportunities they provide for students to learn and excel, the guidance they give, and the way they interact with students' families. When educators believe that underserved students do not excel because of little motivation or limited abilities, they, themselves, are closing doors to those students' futures. They are also damaging the students' self-esteem and their motivation to succeed. The result: Underserved students continue to be underserved.

Educators cannot always change what staff and students believe. However, they can work to change the overall school culture so it supports underserved youth, shows these students they are valued and have self-worth, and provides for and guides them up a pathway to postsecondary education.

Opening Pathways to College Access

It is unconscionable to think that as educators, we are raising barriers to student achievement and closing doors to postsecondary opportunities. But we are, and because white, middle-class American society controls the schools, the members of that society are largely responsible for the success and failure of the students. Yet, educators do not always seem to believe they are responsible for student achievement. According to a Metropolitan Life Insurance Company survey (2000), nearly two-thirds of the teachers polled said that student success is "largely due to factors beyond me."

What, then, can educators do to overcome negative beliefs based on race and class that manifest themselves in not only what we teach our students, but how we teach them and how we structure the environment in which we expect them to learn? School communities that stress equal access and

equal opportunity for all students can be shaped, but it requires the participation of everyone and must reach into the multiple subcultures that co-exist in the school, including adults and students.

What follows are reform initiatives that educators can and should undertake to open pathways to college for underserved students.

1. Acknowledge the negative impact that educators' low expectations, based on racism or stereotyping, can have for underserved students.

As Delpit (2001) notes, "Teacher education usually focuses on research that links failure and socio-economic status, failure and cultural differences, and failure and single-parent households. It is hard to believe that these children can possibly be successful after their teachers have been so thoroughly exposed to so much negative indoctrination" (p. 205). By drawing attention to the fact that we all have preconceived notions about people based on our cultural beliefs and by illustrating how damaging those beliefs can be to the success of underserved students, we take a fundamental step toward helping educators recognize how cultural beliefs close doors for students and how these doors can be reopened.

Open discussions about cultural belief systems in educator pre-service and in-service programs as well as awareness sessions in workshops and seminars at the district and school level can bring the topic into the spotlight. Davis (1993) offers the following suggestions for addressing cultural belief systems in the classroom that may serve as a foundation at an individual, school, or district level:

- Recognize your own biases or stereotypes.
- Make a concerted effort to treat each student as an individual and to respect each student as an individual, conveying the same confidence in the abilities of all students.
- Be sensitive to terminology when referring to ethnic and cultural groups. For example, Americans of Mexican ancestry may prefer Chicano, Latino, or Mexican-American rather than Hispanic. Ask them.
- Become more knowledgeable about the history and culture of the students in the class or school. At the same time, do not "protect" a specific group of students by being more lax in grading their assignments or by giving them more time to complete work. This only sends the message that these students are less able to meet high expectations than the rest of the class.
- Do not let disparaging comments by students or educators go unnoticed.

These suggestions might be incorporated into pre-service and in-service professional development programs as a way to introduce and address the unequal treatment of underserved students in the school and classroom. It is also important to include students in these discussions, as their beliefs and actions can have detrimental effects on their classmates.

2. Create opportunities for educators and students to get to know each other better on a personal basis.

This knowledge leads to more understanding, fewer assumptions, and more personal and academic support for underserved students. Schools should consider personalizing the high school and promoting opportunities for one-on-one interaction between educators and students.

In addition, implementing structural changes can greatly personalize a school. We must provide a school climate that is caring and supportive – one that does not judge, but motivates. Schools can implement several structural changes that create small, personalized learning communities, including

heterogeneous grouping, schools-within-a-school, and block scheduling. These structures promote teacher-student interaction and allow teachers to know their students better both academically and personally. Knowledge can break down cultural barriers. In the words of a Native Alaskan educator: "In order to teach you, I must know you" (Delpit, 2001, p. 211).

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (1996) summarizes what high schools can and should look like to best serve our nation's youth. Several recommendations focus on creating a personalized environment, even in large high schools, and include the following:

- Every student should have a personal adult advocate.
- Every student should have a personal progress plan.
- Large high schools must be in units of no more than 600 students, and each teacher should be responsible for no more than 90 students each term.
- Flexible, innovative scheduling should replace glacier-like, 50-minute segments.

Small learning communities can take many forms, from organizational/structural reconfiguration to curriculum changes to simply a friendlier school climate. Several strategies for designing a smaller learning community are addressed here, including those that require structural changes (physical and organizational) and those that focus on curriculum changes. The success of a program depends in large part on the level of implementation, the leadership of the principal, and the support of the district, the students, and the community. Typically, once a school staff makes a commitment to get to know their students – once that mission becomes internalized – the strategies for doing so naturally multiply until personalization is embedded in every aspect of the school.

It is important to foster respectful, cooperative relationships among educators and students. In a survey of successful intervention programs, Gandara (1999) concluded that "the single most identified feature of success with individual students was a close, caring relationship with a knowledgeable adult who monitors the student's success" (p. 7). In addition, students need peer networks that provide support for ethnic identity while also supporting high achievement.

These are all areas to which schools can pay attention. For example, mentoring programs promote positive relationships between students and caring adults. Some programs focus on pairing at-risk, underserved students with an adult who can serve as a positive role model. Other mentoring programs focus on pairing students with professionals in a career that interests them so that they can learn more about the career and better understand the relationship between schooling and the future.

Mentors can play many roles, including offering tutoring and academic assistance, providing motivation toward finishing high school and entering college, helping students focus on a career and taking the steps toward that career, and being a role model for positive behavior.

Menlo-Atherton High School in Menlo Park, California, has a youth development program called RISE (Realizing Intellect through Self-Empowerment) that focuses on the academic and personal growth of African-American students through mentoring, academic support, and the enhancement of life skills. RISE has helped increase the high school graduation rate of African-American students by providing much needed special attention and role models for at-risk students.

Mentoring programs need not be face-to-face to be successful. The HP Telementor Program, created and funded by the Hewlett-Packard Company, is focused on improving mathematics and science achievement among students in grades 5-12, increasing the number of females and minorities studying and teaching mathematics and science, and ensuring that all children are ready to learn when they attend school.

Mentors for the program, Hewlett-Packard employees from around the world, are responsible for communicating with their student at least 2-3 times per week throughout the 36-week academic period. The mentors agree to be positive role models, encourage the student to excel in math and science, use appropriate grammar and effective communication skills, encourage the student to use the Internet as a resource, and correspond with the student's teacher and Telementor staff.

Teachers have indicated many positive results, including increases in student attendance, use of echnology, involvement at school, self-confidence, and motivation.

3. Celebrate diversity and affirm self-worth.

More than just celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr. Day or Cinco de Mayo, this requires teachers and administrators to explore and celebrate differences, and to infuse this recognition throughout the curriculum and the school. Children come to school with misconceptions about different ethnic and cultural groups. If we are to provide opportunities for all students and help them gain the skills needed to function in our global society, they need to learn about the world around them. This includes de-Westernizing the culture by adding multicultural aspects. We must develop resiliency in these students rather then provide them with an excuse for not achieving.

According to Gandara (1999), most effective intervention programs that promote college access pay attention to the students' cultural background and attempt to incorporate this background in the structure and content of the program. Educators must make a concerted effort to understand and respect the cultural differences of their students and of each other and, whenever possible, incorporate their students' language and culture into learning activities. They must also help students see how their learning will benefit them in college and in their career. Internships, apprenticeships, and business-mentor relationships help students make this connection.

Schools can change their climate to one that supports high expectations for all students by providing opportunities for all students to achieve, by fostering self-confidence, and by highlighting student strengths rather than weaknesses. For example, at Frederick Douglass Academy in New York City, a contemporary, segregated African-American school, students are taught to respect each other and work together for the uplifting of the African-American community through close-knit relationships with staff. The college preparation school reform effort emerged out of the black traditions of collective survival, racial uplift, and connectedness to involve the entire community (Oesterreich, 2000).

Schools can promote success for underserved students by ensuring that these students are made to feel a part of the majority culture without being expected to discard their own. Schools should encourage students to participate, include them in all aspects of school life (academic and co-curricular), and provide role models who can validate them culturally and personally.

4. Set high expectations and promote equal opportunities for all students.

Because tracking, historically, has limited learning opportunities for underserved students, schools should consider shifting toward heterogeneous grouping in which students learn with other students of varying ability or age. Students should have fewer options to opt out of a rigorous curriculum that includes algebra, geometry, calculus, biology, chemistry, physics, and a foreign language. Schools should promote advanced placement and honors classes and create an environment of college-going expectations for all students.

Promote a standards-based system to ensure that all students are evaluated consistently and fairly. Far from discriminating against underserved students, setting high and challenging content standards for them will send the message that they, too, can achieve. Student progress reports should be disaggregated by race, English proficiency, and socioeconomic status to ensure that underserved students are not "lost" in the progress report of student achievement. These high standards must be accompanied by high levels of support within the school community in order to ensure fairness.

Schools should provide test preparation for the PSAT, SAT, and ACT and encourage all students to take these tests. If finances are a factor, districts should make the commitment to pay the testing fee for students. To provide additional support for underserved students, teachers can enhance their instruction to include peer tutoring, collaboration, and high expectations for all students.

Create bridges between schoolwork and life to emphasize the relationship of education to success in later life. For students to want to learn and go on to college, they must view the curriculum as relevant to their lives and culture. Students sometimes see little connection between school and their future. Mentoring programs can help prepare underserved students for this transition.

The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) (2002) suggests in their study that students are more likely to graduate if they are enrolled in a career academy (a school-within-a-school in which students stay with the same group of teachers for three or four years), are offered an integrated academic and vocational curriculum, and are able to build relationships with local employers for work-based learning opportunities. Because they can choose an area in which to concentrate, students are more interested and involved in their education. They also see the link between education and their future. MDRC studied nine career academies and found that the programs improved school attendance, increased graduation rates, and decreased dropout rates by one-third. Compared with their counterparts who were not in career academies, these students also attended high school more consistently, completed more academic and vocational courses, and were more likely to apply to college.

Focus guidance and counseling on underserved students and their families who are unfamiliar with how to prepare for further education. Counselors should encourage all students – and underserved students in particular – to take a rigorous curriculum to prepare for college. They should help students complete college applications and explore, with families, opportunities for financial aid. The guidance department should take an active role in instituting programs such as mentoring, tutoring, critical problem solving, test preparation, direct teaching, individual and group counseling, motivational speakers, college visits, and summer enrichment programs to not only help students prepare for college, but also to build their self-confidence (Bailis, Melchior, Sokatch, & Sheinberg, 2000).

Increase the number of minority educators in all levels of education. Underserved students need role models who understand their culture and with whom they can identify. School systems should recruit and train teachers with the skills, attitudes, and backgrounds necessary to work effectively with underserved students and who hold them to high expectations. These minority teachers can also set an example of how education can and does lead to success.

5. Improve the home-school-community connection.

Most parents do care about their children's education and do want them to succeed. However, the parents of many underserved students do not know how to get involved or how to work in partnership with their schools. Language and time are often barriers. Therefore, it is incumbent on the schools to take those first steps, to extend an invitation to the students' parents and family. Schools

can offer parent information nights presented in languages represented by the student body. Counselors can visit students' homes and meet with their families on familiar ground. Schools can encourage family members to participate on advisory boards.

Community involvement in school activities is also a powerful way to gain participation and trust. Inviting local minority businesspeople whom the students respect into the school shows underserved students that they, too, can be successful. Establishing mentoring programs with local businesspeople is a great way to forge a link between school and career.

Forge partnerships among elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, institutions of higher education, and the community to focus on promoting postsecondary education. An excellent way to promote education beyond high school is to establish mentoring programs with college students. There must be coordination among all levels to ensure students are on the college track as early as elementary school. All students should be expected to learn, and college should be held up early as a goal. Schools that do not offer advanced placement courses can still offer these opportunities to their students using the Internet and other distance learning venues.

The Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI) is a partnership of the University of Southern California (USC), the Los Angeles Unified School District, Foshay Learning Center, and Manual Arts High School. NAI was founded on the assumption that student success is directly connected to the student's neighborhood. Rather than removing students from their communities where social problems such as drug use, crime, and unemployment dominate the news, this college preparation program assumes that learning occurs only if families and neighborhoods are connected to schooling and college preparation and, therefore, focuses on the strengths of its students, their families, and the environments in which they live.

NAI offers educational and social service programs to low-income, at-risk, minority scholars and their families. Counselors, teachers, and tutors work with students and their parents before and after school during the week and on Saturday mornings. Those students who meet USC's admission criteria are guaranteed a 4 1/2-year tuition scholarship. USC awarded $2 million in NAI scholarships between 1996 and 1998. More information is available at www.usc.edu/admin/provost/nai/nai.html.

Some high schools and local community colleges and universities have set up programs such that the college students serve as mentors for at-risk high school students, sharing with them their own high school experiences, discussing the positive aspects of higher education, being role models, or simply listening to at-risk students expressing their ambitions and hopes for the future.

Closing Thoughts

What makes teacher expectations and the resultant discrimination so difficult to eradicate is that personal beliefs are deep-seated, part of our individual and cultural experiences, and therefore difficult to change from the outside. They are also often hidden. Even if they believe it to be true, few people are willing to admit that they consider white students to be smarter than African-American students or wealthy students to be more capable than poor students. And one would suspect that even fewer educators are willing to admit that they treat underserved students any differently in the classroom than they do the rest of their students.

However, taking the first step of acknowledging the role teacher expectations play in opening or closing doors to student postsecondary opportunities and then creating a schoolwide and systemwide dialogue about this issue in and of itself begins to open those doors.

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